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ABSTRACT

For the last several years, students at a Gainesville, Florida middle school have produced an award winning literary journal. It is exciting to win national awards, but the greatest reward comes when each student discovers that there is a writer within him- or herself. With very few exceptions, all of the writing published in each year's journal is done in the classroom. Students in the seventh and eighth grade language arts classes have an integrated reading, writing, and literature program that requires them to write on a daily basis. Their writings may be in response to the story of the week through identification with the character(s), description of setting, development of theme, telling of related happenings, invented dialogues, imagined alternate happenings, or imagined a'ternate endings. Stories used in the program must have literary merit, but they must also relate to the interests and concerns of this age group. Functioning as a facilitator and catalyst, the teacher helps students to understand that writing is a process that involves multiple drafts, conferencing (with peers and teacher), editing, and proofreading. The journal comes together when student editors review the submissions and make decisions together about what to publish. Further expansion of this literary journal project may come next year when students take part in an interdisciplinary project, for which that will study the work and life of Marjorie K. Rawlings, the late writer and resident of Cross Creek, Florida. (TB)

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IMPACT

Ideas to improve school practices

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AN AWARD WINNING JOURNAL FOR ALL MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS: WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

BARBARA KAISER
MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER

For the last several years, our middle school students have produced an award winning literary journal. Of course, it is exciting to win national awards, but the greatest reward comes when each student discovers the writer that exists within us all.

With very few exceptions, all of the writing published in each year's journal is done in the classroom. Students in the seventh and eighth grade language arts classes have an integrated reading, writing, and literature program. This curriculum involves them in individual writing experiences on an almost daily basis from the beginning of the school year.

Their writings may be in response to the "story of the week" through identification with the character(s), description of setting, development of theme, telling of related happenings, invented dialogues, imagined alternate happenings, or imagined alternate endings. Stories used in the program must have literary merit, but should also relate to the interests and concerns of this age group. It is extremely important that these stories also demonstrate the effective use of our language to reveal ideas, actions, and images so that they may serve as excellent models for young student writers. Each week the story is presented on cassette tape as well as in print, not only to accommodate different learning styles but because it seems almost impossible to write well if one does not know what good writing sounds like; the ear must be trained to hear the rhythm and the music of a story well told.

What Is the Role of the Teacher?

It is important that the teacher functions not primarily as an instructor of writing, but as a facilitator and catalyst who creates an environment and sets a tone that allows and encourages writers to write. It is helpful (and fun!) for the teacher to write as students write and to share her/his writing responses with the students when it seems appropriate to do so.

Where Is the Emphasis Placed?

From the beginning emphasis is on brainstorming, clustering, mapping and other pre-writing activities that "free" students to put ideas on paper. There is emphasis on flow, fluency, and content rather than corrections. Writing, like reading, is a process. The end result of the process is a finished product. Correctness- spelling, punctuation, grammar- is certainly important, but is stressed as one of the **final** editing and proofreading steps in the writing process.

Each student experiences success - and the importance of this is critical - when the initial emphasis is on communication, expression of ideas, response, and process.

What Actually Happens in the Classroom?

Students are encouraged to begin several short writings in writing responses during the first few days of each week. At the end of the week, students select from their rough drafts (some may be only a short paragraph in length) with one idea in which they have the most interest. This is the idea to which they will be able to make sufficient commitment to take the writing "across the finish line."

Time should be built into the class period for the students to be involved with partners or in small writing response groups in order to receive the necessary feedback that is essential to the total writing experience. Every writer - professional writers and editors model this for us in the real world - needs an editor and an audience at critical moments in the writing process.

As each quarter progresses, most students accumulate a file (everyone is admonished to throw nothing away) of short writings, writing responses to literature, and first drafts resulting from the various writing activities

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in which they have been involved. They regularly select from these the writings in which there is sufficient interest to work (sometimes painstakingly) through several drafts, editing, proofreading, and conferencing, until there is a completely finished written product. This finished writing is shared with others - either in small groups or with the total class or both - and then "published" on the classroom's **Fame & Glory** board. From this "classroom publication experience" students are encouraged to select writings for submission to the Literary Journal.

How Does the Journal Come Together?

The editorial writing staff is composed of eighth graders whose time and interest allow them to make a commitment after school hours. Staff members sign a contract agreeing to give a certain number of hours of their personal time and to attend required meetings after school so that all may participate and have ownership. The critical decisions are made (title, cover, design, content, etc.) by everyone. All staff members indicate the specific areas in which they feel they have the most talent or interest and they are given the major responsibilities for these designated areas.

All classroom teachers receive submissions for the journal from their students throughout the year. On the agreed upon deadline date, all originals are forwarded to the journal sponsor. Xeroxed copies are made and packets are given to the individual editorial staff members. These students are then responsible for contacting individual student writers to assist in final proofreading and editing decisions.

After this, corrected, final copies are given to the typist. When the typing phase is completed, our editorial staff teams with the editorial art staff to cut and paste and complete the layout design. Art work - drawings, prints, etc. - submitted by middle school artists is incorporated into the journal.

During the year, whenever practical and desirable, student artists and writers respond to each others' work so that before the layout process begins some works have already been designated as complimentary to each other. Others that are suitable are selected for deliberate placement with a story, poem, or essay. The final graphics layout and cover design is done cooperatively with the student artists. It should not be overlooked that some students are writers and artists and can assume both roles successfully as we accomplish this final step in the publication.

What Other Possibilities Exist?

A further expansion of our literary journal for next year may come as the result of a special team project now in process. The supportive Cross Creek staff members have worked closely with P.K. Yonge social studies and language arts faculty to develop a seven week interdisciplinary unit that culminates in a visit to the home of Marjorie K. Rawlings. This project enables our students to use their investigative, journalistic, and research writing skills to increase their understanding of the literary works of Marjorie K. Rawlings and the life and times of the Cross Creek residents decades ago.

Our students work with the Marjorie K. Rawlings staff and community resource persons from Gainesville, the University of Florida, and Cross Creek. Small student groups focus on specific interest areas. Economics, agriculture, architecture and cooking as well as life styles and a knowledge of Marjorie Rawlings as a writer and resident of Cross Creek, become areas of major concern and exploration.

The commitment and support of everyone thus far involved has encouraged us to continue and possibly expand this project. It may indeed result in a wider collaboration between students in their various roles as researchers, journalists, essayists, poets, and artists in the future.

Finally, What is the Critical Difference?

As teachers know, once students are empowered, possibilities that we can not now imagine become realized. Of this we are certain: people who see purpose and meaning in what they do go a long way towards providing their own momentum and success - if only they are given an environment which nourishes and supports them.

If we keep in mind that in working with students our role is primarily that of resource person, supportive adult, facilitator, and catalyst, then we will define the product by the learning process in which we are all involved.

Your literary journal - like ours - will evolve as you learn and grow and work together. Best of all, it will indeed be a product that is uniquely, and most importantly, your very own!

Barbara Kaiser earned her M.Ed. from the University of Florida. She has taught at P.K. Yonge Laboratory School since 1975, and has taught Middle School Language Arts for the last 5 years. Ms. Kaiser has coordinated numerous workshops throughout the Southeast, and has presented at many state conferences.